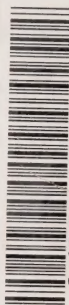


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WHAT PARENTS
CAN DO
ABOUT

Harassment and Abuse in Sport

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Canadian Association
for the Advancement
of Women and Sport
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**Canadian Association for
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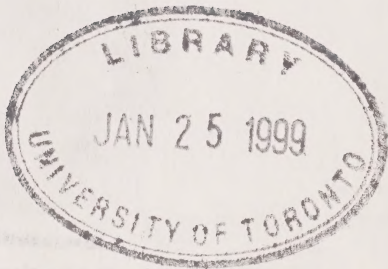
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January 1998



What Parents Can Do About Harassment and Abuse in Sport

As parents, we want to protect our children and keep them physically and emotionally safe and secure. Parents have often turned to sport as a safe place for children to build character, develop skills, and learn valuable lessons. The Sheldon Kennedy abuse case triggered public awareness that sport is not immune from society's problems. While involvement in sport remains a positive experience for most participants, parents are now aware that children face the risk of being harassed and abused in sport.

The concern is to make sport safer for children. Parents may be able to breathe a little easier knowing that they can take concrete actions. In fact, they can play a key role in creating a safe and nurturing environment for children — an environment where the risk of abuse is minimal.

It is important to note that sport clubs, organizations, and municipalities have a key role to play as well. Together we can make a difference.

With information, families can do a great deal to protect their children. The following outlines some of the actions parents can take, both in the sporting environment and at home.

Actions to Take in the Sporting Environment

Children involved in sport often make strong connections and develop a special trusting relationship with their coaches and instructors who exert great influence over them. If this power is abused, children can suffer enormous consequences.

When you enroll your child in a sport club, ask if the club has a harassment/ abuse policy and procedures in place. If not, suggest implementation within the season.

Ask the club if screening procedures are in place. As a minimum, coaches should have job descriptions which define and limit their authority, references should be

checked, and there should be ongoing monitoring and evaluation. In higher risk situations (such as when the coach frequently travels out of town on unsupervised trips with young athletes) additional steps should be taken. Steps include conducting a police records check, interviews, and participant follow up to ask children how they feel about the way they are treated in sport and their reactions to people around them.

Ask if the club's coach is certified and a member of a coaching association with a code of ethics.

Get involved, and get to know your child's coach. Talk to the coach at the beginning of the season. Discuss the expectations for the season. Ask the coach to involve your child in age-appropriate decisions.

Maintain open and frank communication with the coach as the season progresses. If things occur that disturb you, talk to the coach about them. You may also wish to pursue your issues with the club executive or league. Speak out when you hear language or attitudes which contribute to the problem. Work to change policies you disagree with. If necessary, talk to the league, or the provincial or national sport organization.

The tendency is to give tremendous licence to a coach with a good won-lost record. Be careful not to put coaches on pedestals. Use caution in telling your children to, "Listen to the coach and do everything the coach tells you to do." Children need to be taught to be assertive and establish strong personal boundaries. Tell your children it's OK to say "no" from time to time if the coach is doing something that makes them feel "creepy".

Make an effort to attend practices and games whenever you can. Your child will appreciate your interest, and it will give you the opportunity to watch the coach in action, and see how she/he interacts with the athletes.

Keep an eye out for other children whose parents are unable to attend practices or games.

Be wary of private, closed practices. If they occur on a regular basis, ask the coach for an explanation.

Be wary of any increase in the amount of time the coach spends with your child beyond the training situation.

Part of keeping children safe is not taking offense when asked about your own background. If you volunteer in sport, and you are asked to take part in screening, accept this as a positive step to keeping children safe.

If you witness harassing or abusive behaviours, speak out. Make sure you aren't part of the problem yourself by slinging verbal abuse at referees, coaches, or the competition. Children learn by example so model fair play by applauding good performances of both your child and his/her opponents. Make your child feel like a winner every time by offering praise for competing fairly and trying hard. Never ridicule your child for making a mistake or losing. Encourage your child to play by the rules and resolve conflicts without resorting to hostility.

Boundary Setting

Suggest a pre-season meeting of parents, athletes, coaches, and board members to discuss behaviour boundaries. Boundary setting involves discussing, negotiating, and drawing the lines around the acceptable and the unacceptable. These limits enable safe and healthy relationships and define what coaches can and cannot do in their relationships with athletes.

Establishing boundaries provides clarity about roles, offers comfort and predictability in coach-athlete relationships, and builds a safe and healthy learning environment. Agreement on what is acceptable should be reached following discussion between the coach, club officials, and parents.

*Discuss and negotiate **physical** boundaries. For instance,*

- There will be touching of athletes to learn new skills.
- The coach will not shower with the athletes.
- Excessive exercise will not be used as punishment.

*Discuss and negotiate **social** boundaries. For instance,*

- The coach will attend sport-related social events and awards banquets.
- The coach will avoid parties with athletes outside of sport-related situations, and will not accept personal gifts from athletes.

- The coach will not date his/her athletes.
- The coach will not purchase alcohol for the athletes.

Discuss sexual boundaries. For instance,

- After the athlete has retired, he or she and the coach may choose to enter into a sexual relationship.
- The coach will not have sexual relationships with current athletes (consensual or otherwise).
- The coach will not sleep in the same room with his/her athletes in order to save money while attending competitions.

Streetproofing For Sport

Educate yourself and talk about harassment and abuse with your children. Teach them the difference between friendly teasing and bullying, between flirting and harassment. Teach them how to deal with inappropriate behaviours. Ignoring the situation can often lead to a cycle of ongoing victimization.

Part of your conversation could go something like this:

“People touch each other in many ways in sport. Touches are part of learning new skills, and part of providing for your safety. Often touching — like hugging, or high 5s — takes place as part of celebrating something great in sport. We often shake hands after games to show respect for the other players.

“Some touches are hurtful and not OK. If you are confused about whether a touch is OK or not, ask someone you trust. No adult should touch your penis/vagina/anus/breasts, except for health reasons. Never keep a touch secret. If an adult touches you and says, “Let’s keep this our secret”, you should tell. No adult should ask you to touch their private parts. You are not to blame if an adult touches your private parts and if they do, it is not your fault. We will believe what you tell us. If you are unable to tell us, it might be best to talk to your favourite teacher or the school’s guidance counsellor. Your body belongs to you. You have the right to say ‘no’.”

Check to see if your children have understood you by playing “What If” games in which you discuss specific situations and ask the child to participate in identifying solutions.

Actions For Parents To Take At Home

Families play an important role in socializing children. Families are a place where children learn survival skills and learn how to solve problems. In caring for and nurturing your children, there are a number of values you can instill, skills you can teach, and behaviours you can model as part of an abuse prevention program.

Talk It Up!

Sheldon Kennedy tolerated years of abuse before he came forward. His is not a unique reaction. Harassment and abuse have a silencing effect and sexual abuse has a high shame factor. Children are often afraid to report it because of its degrading nature, or because they fear getting the perpetrator into trouble, or do not want to risk their spot on the team.

Body Talk!

If we want to encourage our kids to talk to us about sexual abuse, we need to give them the appropriate vocabulary and labels to use. Parents should speak openly about healthy sexuality in their home.

As a culture, we don't talk openly about sex. In most homes, we tend to learn sex as a second language, and not part of our regular vocabulary. We sing songs with our kids like "Head and shoulders, knees and toes" which skip the important body parts in between shoulders and knees. Our children play with dolls that don't have vaginas or penises, making a mystery of an essential part of our bodies.

Work to ensure that your household is not silent on sexuality and that it is not considered a taboo subject. Teach your children the accurate labels for penis, vagina, anus, breasts, and so on. If we want children to talk openly, we need to give them the words to use. This also tells them that their parents know about these body parts, and can talk about them.

Provide opportunities for conversation. Encourage questions whenever and wherever they surface, not just at specified times and places like the supper table. Let your children know that nothing is off limits, that there is no such thing as a stupid question. If you don't know the answer, say so and let your child know you will try to find out.

Get informed about aspects of sexuality like birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual intercourse, homosexuality, masturbation, and abortion. This will help you to feel more at ease when a question surfaces about the topic.

Make a point of initiating discussion with your children about sexuality rather than waiting for questions to arise. If the reaction is disinterest, postpone the discussion, but make sure the children know they can bring the subject up at any time, and that you're willing to talk in a non-judgmental fashion.

Walk The Talk

It is important to model appropriate behaviours in your home. Demonstrate that violence — emotional or physical — is not acceptable in solving personal problems. Make a point of building your child's self-esteem at every opportunity. Positive discipline at home results in children developing a strong sense of self-esteem and knowing the difference between discipline and abuse.

RECOGNIZING HARASSMENT AND ABUSE*

When is my child unsafe?

Young people are unsafe when someone uses his or her power or position to harm them either emotionally, physically, or sexually—this is **abuse**. Your child's safety is also at risk when she or he is threatened, intimidated, taunted, or subjected to racial, homophobic, or sexist slurs by another youth—this is **harassment**.

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse is a chronic attack on a child's self esteem. It is psychologically destructive behaviour by a person in a position of power, authority, or trust. It can take the form of name calling, threatening, ridiculing, intimidating, isolating, hazing, or ignoring a child's needs.

What is physical abuse?

Physical abuse is when a person in a position of power or trust purposefully injures or threatens to injure a child. This may take the form of slapping, hitting, shaking, kicking, pulling hair, pulling ears, striking, shoving, grabbing, hazing, or excessive exercise as a form of punishment.

What is neglect?

Neglect is a chronic inattention to the basic necessities of life such as supervision, medical and dental care, adequate rest, safe environment, exercise, and fresh air.

Neglect may occur in sport when injuries are not adequately treated, athletes are made to play with injuries, equipment is inadequate or unsafe, or road trips are not properly supervised.

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is when a young person is used by an older child, adolescent or adult for his or her own sexual stimulation or gratification.

What is harassment?

For youths who are minors, harassment is a behaviour, by one minor towards another minor, which is insulting, intimidating, humiliating, malicious, degrading or offensive. It creates negative and uncomfortable feelings for the person, or group of persons, to whom it is directed.

**Adapted from Fair Play Means Safety for All, CHA, 1997.*

Possible Signs of Harassment /Abuse

Your child may not always tell you there is a problem. You know your child best, so be aware of unexplained behaviour changes such as

- suddenly becoming aggressive.
- quitting the team or being reluctant to return to the sport activity.
- sleep disorders.
- emotional disorders.
- sliding grades at school.
- changes in appetite.
- fear of washrooms, locker rooms, or closed doors.
- running away.

- sudden and disproportionate interest in sex for their age. It is important to note that sexualized behaviour in children is the result of sexual abuse, not its cause.
- reluctance to talk.
- frequent vomiting.

There may be obvious physical signs such as

- bruises
- scratches
- inflammation
- lesions
- bleeding
- genital injuries
- sexually transmitted diseases
- pregnancy.

Be vigilant and talk to your child if you see one or more of these signs, but bear in mind that these symptoms do not always indicate abuse. Behaviours have many meanings, but a pattern of behaviours needs special attention.

What To Do If A Child Reports Harassment / Abuse

There is a significant under-reporting of harassment and abuse. If your child tells you there is a problem,

- listen and believe.
- never turn a deaf ear, even to seemingly trivial calls for help.
- support your child.
- discuss their options with them.
- help them to restore a sense of control in their lives by involving them in deciding how to deal with the problem.

- reassure them continuously.
- take them somewhere where they can talk freely.
- speak on a level they can understand.

What you hear may shock you. No matter what you are told, stay calm and show that you are listening. Children need to know that harassment is not their fault, nor a reflection on them. Possible responses include, “I believe you.” “This is not your fault. You are a victim.” “I am going to help you.”

Harassment and abuse can inflict deep psychological damage on young people. Arrange for counselling to help your child come to terms with what has happened. Other family members may need this support as well.

Your response to eliminating the harassment or abuse should be determined by the nature of the behaviour and the age of the victim. Options include talking to the coach, manager, or club president. This can often clear up a simple problem quickly. If you feel the situation cannot be resolved at this level, there are other avenues to consider as described below.

What can I do if I think my child is being harassed?

- report the harassment to the club’s board of directors.
- report the harassment to the provincial or national sport organization. Contact your club for the phone number. Many organizations have harassment policies in place which outline how the complaint will be heard.
- report the suspected harassment to your provincial Human Rights Commission.

What can I do if I think my child is being abused?

If you have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child may be suffering abuse, you must report it immediately to the local child protection agency or police. Across Canada, a person is considered a child up to the age of 16 to 19, depending upon the province.

- report suspected abuse to the police.
- call Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868. Trained counsellors are

available 24 hours a day to help children deal with painful situations.

- sue under the Civil Code. You may sue anyone who had an opportunity to do something about the abuse, and didn't. This could include the perpetrator, the employer, the provincial sport organization, the club, and so on.
- call the rape crisis centre.
- call Crimestoppers. This allows you to leave an anonymous tip with a police officer.

Recognizing The Offenders And The Victims

Abusers come in all shapes and sizes. They come from all age groups, and all cultural and religious groups and both genders. However, most sexual abusers are heterosexual males.

Offenders put a lot of time and energy into creating situations in which they have access to children.

Abusers are not strangers in trench coats. They often have likable attributes. The majority of offenders are known to the child. They are often people children know and trust, and are dependent upon for basic needs through to their success in the sporting world.

While all children are at risk, children with a disability are two to 10 times more vulnerable to abuse.

Secrecy and abuse of power are central to sexual abuse.

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Need More Information?

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